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# A PERENNIAL NATIONAL PROBLEM

BY SPEAKER CHAMP CLARK

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THE farthest-seeing constructive statesman, the most masterful friend and champion of humanity in modern times, architect of our independence, seer of our national strength, prophet of our national progress, Thomas Jefferson, was the foremost genius of our national expansion.

When he got from Napoleon the grand domain of the Louisiana Purchase, he bought for the United States the control and possession of the Mississippi River. There was nothing in this tremendous achievement of expansion westward, more than doubling the area of the young republic, dearer to his heart, more inspiring to his imagination, than the embracing of the Mississippi River. Long before the consummation of the purchase his persuasive voice and potent pen were continually used to urge the importance of control for the citizens of the United States of the navigation of the Mississippi River. When its lower reaches were alternately in the hands of Spain and France, and disputes arose over the rights of passage by our citizens through to the Gulf waters, he ardently espoused the cause of his countrymen. The year 1801, when Jefferson became President, the area of the United States was but 827,000 square miles, all east of the Mississippi River, with all Florida and the area of the future Louisiana Purchase belonging to Spain. The possessions of that country in the Western Hemisphere amounted to over 7,000,000 square miles. Great Britain was next in New World possessions, with 3,719,000 square miles. Russia, holding Alaska, had 577,000 square miles. France, through the courage and genius of her missionaries and explorers, her soldiers and traders, had acquired a dominion in North America scarcely second to that of Great Britain, but in the rivalry between the two here and in the Old World she was dispossessed of all but 29,000 square miles. It remained for

Napoleon's prowess and genius to restore much of what France had lost through wresting from Spain all her possessions in the northern half of the Western Hemisphere which became known as the Louisiana Purchase. For a time Napoleon had dreamed of establishing on the western bank of the Mississippi, and controlling both sides of the lower river, with New Orleans as its seat, a great Western World empire. But nearly all of the Old World got to fighting him, resisting the reckless ambition bent upon dominating the European continent, making and unmaking kings at will to rule or caprice to play with nations as a master of the game would move the pieces on a chessboard. Great Britain was his formidable foe, and was the one Power that had most embarrassed his soaring fancy, most effectually and most often blocked his designs. He conceived the idea of transferring by sale to the United States his embryo empire in the Western World, and with it the control of the Mississippi River. He knew it was the severest blow he could deliver against the growing power of his English rival. "The accession of this territory," said Napoleon, "forever strengthens the United States, and I have just given England a maritime power that will sooner or later humble her pride."

Jefferson, with whom he negotiated the transaction, had been constantly agitating the vital importance to this Republic's safety and welfare of the complete control of the Mississippi from source to mouth. He wanted its great navigation resources and ultimate possession of the vast area drained by its waters. It can be imagined with what profound delight, with what thrilled anticipations, he approached the consummation of the purchase. His cardinal principles of faith for the American people were the erection of a great structure of everlasting national commercial independence upon the four pillars of "agriculture, commerce, navigation, and manufacture." With him a most absorbing obsession was to own the Mississippi. With him it was a case of "must." "The navigation of the Mississippi," he declared as far back as 1790, "we must have." Again, a little later, and years before the Louisiana Purchase, he asserted: "The navigation of the Mississippi in full and unrestrained freedom is indispensably necessary, and must be obtained by any means it may call for."

Thomas Jefferson was the first publicity agent for the national ownership of the Mississippi River, as he had been the first publicity agent for the erection of the four pillars of our national prosperity, as he had been the first publicity agent of our national independence. As a publicity agent the world never saw his like, all for humanity, all for the progress of human liberty. He wrote much and ardently. His pen sped with a powerful unmatched enthusiasm and a fertile genius for persuasion unexcelled in any era of human forward development. His labor of love was at its best when his theme was the Mississippi Valley and the navigation of the Mississippi River.

A brilliant biographer of Napoleon said of his sale of Louisiana to the United States: "It was an event second in importance to no other in their history; for it gave them control of the intercontinental river system, and later of the Pacific coast, while indirectly it prepared the way for the conflict of 1812, which finally secured their commercial independence."

Following the close of the Revolution, and up to the war of 1812, our American Republic was a feeble institution among the nations of the world, and might have been ignored, might, indeed, have been overwhelmed and absorbed, but for the international strife that was shaking all Europe and imperiling the foundations of empires in the Old World. We were nominally and politically independent, but not until the American victory at New Orleans did we attain American commercial independence. Jackson and his Kentuckians and Tennesseans, the bulk of his forces coming from the States and Territories on the banks of the Mississippi River, backing the little regular army nucleus, rushed southward to drive the British from the lower valley and secured it forever from hostile foreign intrusion. And ever since the victory at New Orleans, with the expulsion from the Mississippi River of the great veteran British army, with its fleet of transports and men-of-war, we have had a progressive nation, a forward-moving, wide-expanding republic—no longer grouped and hedged in between the Atlantic and the great water highway Jefferson vowed we must have, a set of comparatively little States, bickering among themselves about privilege and precedent, jealous of one another, and for the most part rivals only in aping England or Europe. Then, with the acquisition of

Louisiana we began to be Americans; we had acquired a true center of national gravitation, the Mississippi River.

In his glorious old age Jefferson's thoughts often turned with delighted contemplation to the westward course of American empire, and he lingered with fond expectancy upon the future of the dwellers in the grand area drained by the Mississippi. "They are our sons and daughters," said he. "God bless them ever."

From the Mississippi's far reaches through its mouth across the Gulf of Mexico to the Isthmus of Panama must run a stream of commerce which will traverse the canal.

A Latin-American historian, one of the brightest of his race, F. Garcia Calderon, recently wrote:

The canal sets a frontier to Yankee ambition; it is the southern line, the "south coast," of which a North American politician, Jefferson, used to dream. As early as 1809 he believed that Cuba and Canada would become incorporated States in the American Union in the immense confederation. Anticipating the rude lyrics of Walt Whitman, he dreamed of founding an empire of liberty "so vast the like has never been seen." Heirs to Anglo-Saxon genius, the Americans of the North wish to form a Democratic federation. They have succeeded in doing in Cuba what Japan has done in Korea; first, the struggle for autonomy, then the necessary intervention, then a protectorate, and perhaps next annexation. Thus the prophecy of Jefferson will be realized.

Humboldt, as soon as he had visited the New World in 1804, said of the destined Isthmian canal:

The products of China will be brought more than six thousand miles nearer Europe and the United States; great changes will take place in the political conditions of eastern Asia, because this tongue of earth (Panama) had for centuries been the rampart of the independence of China and Japan.

The "great changes" have already set in, and mightier are yet to come. With the operation of the canal and commerce from the great American intercontinental river system converging for passage into the Pacific, bound for our western coast ports and distant oceanic and Oriental marts, with this new route for international trade opened, what wondrous changes may not be wrought in the fortunes of mankind! China, Japan, India, the Philippines, Oceania, New Zealand, Australia, brought thousands of miles nearer to our own and Europe's greatest shipping ports and centers of civilization, would inevitably quicken human interests and universally stimulate human energy.

There will be no surer, stronger factor in this enlivening of human progress than that furnished by the life-giving commerce of the world's granary, the Mississippi Valley.

Is it any wonder, then, that the navigation and control of the Mississippi River is a perennial national problem in the United States? If there be one practical theme of common concern to enlightened Americans, to men of all political parties, it is this. The three great political parties at their National Conventions two years ago, political parties which alone have representation in Congress, have vied with one another in emphasis of declaration for the improvement and maintenance of navigation of the Mississippi, the construction of an adequate system of levees, and the prevention of floods. It is recognized as a national problem, because the river is a national possession, with levees of interstate extent of necessity, and liable to overflows of waters pouring from the highlands of many States, inflicting national disaster. The Mississippi's transcendent importance as a great continental inland highway of commerce has been recognized all over the world ever since De Soto first looked upon the sweep of its majestic waters.

It is no novel proposition, no new thing that the Mississippi River imposes a continuous national problem. Jefferson's great idea was to get possession of the river. Having got it, and learned something of what it was, American statesmanship took heed of the problem it presented. President John Tyler, in his message of 1844, June 11, declared of the river:

It belongs to no particular State or States, but of common right, by express reservation, to all the States. It is reserved as a great common highway for the commerce of the whole country. . . . The United States, therefore, is charged with its improvement for the benefit of all, and the appropriation of governmental means to its improvement becomes indispensably necessary for the good of all.

Colonel Thomas Hart Benton, the Pericles of the golden age of American statesmanship, lived in one of the greatest States on the Mississippi. He never saw the river, never crossed it, never thought of it, that his far-piercing intellect did not apostrophize the Mississippi. The following is an extract from a letter of his to the Chicago Convention of 1847:

Wonderful river! connecting with seas by the head and by the mouth—stretching its arms toward the Atlantic and the Pacific—lying in a valley,

which is a valley from the Gulf of Mexico to Hudson's Bay—drawing its first waters not from rugged mountains, but from a plateau of lakes in the center of the continent, and in communication with the sources of the St. Lawrence and the streams which take their course north to Hudson's Bay—draining the largest extent of richest land, collecting the products of every clime, even the frigid, to bear the whole to a genial market in the Sunny South, and there to meet the products of the entire world. Such is the Mississippi! And who can calculate the aggregate of its advantages and the magnitude of its future commercial results?

John C. Calhoun, opposed as he was on strict constitutional constructive grounds to internal improvement by the Government, in 1845 had recommended in a report to Congress an appropriation to build embankments to protect lands on the river from overflow. Henry Clay, who never overlooked the interests of the great valley, suggested that its people would rise

*en masse* and tumble down your little hair-splitting distinctions about what is national and demand what is just and fair on the part of this Government in relation to this great interest. The Mississippi River, with its tributaries, constitutes part of a great system, and if the system is not national I should like to know one that is national.

President after President has recognized the river's national scope and the national obligation due.

The old policy of river and harbor appropriations, biennially, or at longer intervals, was a serious mistake of public conduct. The appropriations were inadequate, and consequently the public work was insufficient and inefficient. The too meager appropriation was often money wasted; it was a kind of foolish extravagance. It was like tossing gold and silver and currency into the flood as it raged on its destructive way. For these appropriations at long intervals were most flagrantly inadequate as provided for the Mississippi River, not so much in items for the improvement and maintenance of navigation as in the failure to provide for the control of the waters by the construction of an impregnable levee defense. The intervening years, without appropriation by Congress, witnessed the might of the waters undoing the work of previous appropriations. The flood demon was no respecter of the convenience of Congress, was reckless of policies and of the preachments of national economy. Yet, strange as it may seem, he had allies among human beings here among us in the demagogue and in a fatuous or ill-advised press. It was not until public opinion

convinced Congress that annual appropriations was the wisest, and, in fact, the necessary policy, not only for the improvement and maintenance of navigation, but for the control of the river, that the waste was stopped and any material good accomplished, and it was recognized as a national project. The States on the lower river had been struggling, unaided, without cessation against the ruthless enemy, while Congress was doing nothing. It was this waste and extravagance in the years that Congress furnished no help until disaster woke it, and then only to supply insufficient appropriations, resulting inevitably in frittered funds, futile talent, and vain energies. This penny-wise folly provoked for river and harbor appropriations, and very naturally, too, the epithetical condemnation of "pork-barrel" legislation; it engendered suspicion and hostility outside of the Mississippi Valley, titillated pert paragraphists into saucy quips and grim jokes, and uninformed editors of provincial metropolitan newspapers of the East were kept busy upon a series of sarcastic and contumelious diatribes. Since its commencement, five years ago, the wisdom of the annual appropriation policy has been convincingly demonstrated and justified.

Floods have menaced always, and will always imperil, the integrity of the channel of the Mississippi and the homes and lives of the people on both its banks. This is so, year in and year out, that this enemy is to be contended against, an enemy far more persistent and dangerous than any foreign foe we ever had to face.

Since the Revolution we have had the war of 1812, the war of 1846-48 with Mexico, the great war of 1861-65 between the States; the war with Spain, just a part of 1898, followed by the Filipino insurrection, eight thousand miles away; and numerous little wars with Indians, whose prosecution required action of but a fractional part of our regular land forces. I need not give figures of what these few wars cost since the successful close of our war of Independence, one hundred and thirty-two years ago. The informed imagination will take care of the statistical idea. It is enough to say that by liberal annual appropriations we have taken good care of our military establishment. We have, indeed, strained every point to keep our army and navy up-to-date, ready and equipped to meet any possible enemy at any possible time. Hundreds of millions



of dollars are annually appropriated for our man-killing machinery, to say nothing of the billions that have gone for pensions, war claims, and the like. What pittance we have spent to protect property, to preserve life from a huge, ever-present menace, is a mockery of our national intelligence and a reproach to our national sense of humanity. For this flood demon and his devastating army of waters in the highlands of the States of the upper valley and in the fastnesses of the western mountains are ready every year to descend, with reinforcements from the whole drainage area of the river, upon the lands and people of the lower valley, and, unresisted, or inadequately opposed, spread destruction, desolation, and death. Out of the flood, plague, pestilence, and famine are left to garrison the melancholy sites of once happy homes and prosperous towns.

I believe in the Providence of God, the meaning of whose dispensations we may never perfectly know, that all affliction, all disaster, all calamity, whether to persons or nations, was designed to give mankind the lessons of experience. We know how swiftly travels bad news; we know it never failed to write its tragic story in the chronicles of men, preserving the treasures of experience for the heirs of all the ages.

I have thought this at the news of every flood on the Mississippi, as I did when the roaring waters wrought awful havoc in the Ohio Valley in the spring of last year. Had those Ohio torrents been joined to such floods from other parts of the Mississippi's drainage domain as have in recent years broken through the levees, there would have been disaster such as would have appalled the world.

Sweet are the uses of adversity,  
Which, like a toad, ugly and venomous,  
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.

Shakespeare did not need to say the "precious jewel" is experience. In the building of an adequate system of levees, we have not only a common-sense dictated obligation to commerce and the general welfare, but a higher obligation, a moral obligation. We set out to improve navigation and to confine the waters in such way as to keep the channel unbroken, building levees and revetments. That is the business part of the proposition. Next is the moral obligation. No public work, however beneficent,

should be undertaken and permitted that does not guarantee that it shall be so constructed that property and life shall not be endangered thereby. The flood is the great enemy of progress to a large proportion of our people. The Chinese built more than a thousand years ago a wall around the vast domain of their Cathay to fortify against their enemies. I would build a wall if necessary to hold the hostile floods where they would spend their might in dredging and scouring the bed of the Mississippi from Cape Girardeau to the deep waters of the Gulf, for within that extent of river reach, spreading from either bank, and subject to overflow, lie lands than which there is none richer in the world, none so near to profitable markets, none so versatile of production of necessities for the sustenance and luxuries for the enjoyment of mankind.

Much as this may mean for the future prosperity of the country, with the reclamation of the sixteen million acres of marvelously fertile lands that are subject to inundation, it is a minor consideration to the moral obligation of protecting lands already occupied, cultivated, and improved. Ever since the policy of annual appropriation was initiated there have been floods that have destroyed property and fortunes and lives worth more than all that has ever been spent upon the Mississippi.

We are appropriating this year—without an item in anticipation of hostilities with Mexico—\$243,000,000 for our military establishment, 101,000,000 for the army, and \$142,000,000 for the navy; there is, also, \$169,000,000 for pensions. The entire River and Harbor Bill, as it is pending, provides a little over \$40,000,000, of which about \$7,000,000 or \$8,000,000 is for the Mississippi River. The amount given the Mississippi is less than we are spending for the construction of a single dreadnought, or super-dreadnought for the navy, a thing that with the advancement of naval war science and the achievement of genius in aeronautic invention, may in a year or two become obsolete and lapse into just so much for the junk heap. Levee fortification against floods is meant to endure, to save life and property from forces that will remain hostile while rains fall and waters flow.

With all our national boasting about our progress, when we are reminded of what we have done in recognition of the Mississippi River as a national institution, we must

confess we are behind the advancement of other nations—nations inferior in wealth and resources. One city alone in the Argentine Republic, Buenos Ayres, has just spent \$83,000,000 improving her harbor, already nearly twenty-five feet deep, on the Rio del la Plata. On the same river, where it is half a hundred miles across, Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, is spending \$17,000,000 for harbor improvement. At Rio de Janeiro, where the harbor is one of the finest in the world, they have spent \$100,000,000 for sanitation of the city and the land environing the harbor! And, strange as it may seem, the genius of our surgeons in Cuba and Panama taught them what to do to make their great ports immune from yellow fever. One hundred million dollars for preserving the health of one city in Brazil, and we doling a pittance to save life and property in the vast Mississippi Valley!

CHAMP CLARK.